

Chapter 8: Rebuilding

"To build may have to be the slow and laborious task of years. To destroy can be the thoughtless act of a single day." -Winston Churchill

The toll of events such as those that occurred in Wilmington cannot be easily measured. To understand the impact of such a traumatic event on a city is a multifaceted, difficult effort. How did the violence of November 10, preceded by months of white supremacy rhetoric sponsored by the Democratic Party and followed by years of Jim Crow oppression, veiled threats, and further violence—affect the city's African American residents? Consequences for that sector of the community were wide ranging and touched all facets of life: political, economic, and cultural.

Political Consequences

The political ramifications of the coup were clearly visible by the spring of 1899, when the newly elected, Democratically controlled legislature convened and the city held municipal elections. Further evidence of the firm grip the Democrats had on Republican and black voters was the solid victory of Democratic candidates and the disfranchisement agenda in the 1900 elections. Disfranchisement removed from the voter pool the majority of African American voters—the broad political base of the Republican Party. After sound defeat at the polls and the passage of the disfranchisement amendment, the Republican Party acknowledged that it must disavow its connection to its black voter base and make itself “lily-white.” Without the large black voter base, Republicans lost the ability to elect statewide officials, and, as part of their efforts to reinvent the party, they chose to refrain from distributing patronage positions to African Americans. The placement of prominent African American leaders in lucrative and influential patronage positions had long been an

important method of advancement in Wilmington and the state, but, after the 1900 elections, the practice was effectively ended.¹ It has been argued that once African Americans lost their political voice, they re-focused their energies on economic and educational progress.²

Economic Consequences

To address the economic impact of 1898 on Wilmington, the North Carolina Office of Archives and History worked with the Institute of African American Research at the University of North Carolina

¹ Robert Kenzer, *Enterprising Southerners Black Economic Success in North Carolina, 1865-1915*, 105-6. Kenzer also posits that because no blacks held seats in the state legislature or held the power to vote objectionable politicians out of office, legislation favorable to black interests was rarely introduced, and resistance to legislation such as Clarence Poe's land segregation scheme of 1915 was nonexistent. Although African Americans had no votes in the legislature, black leaders managed to influence sympathetic politicians in a variety of ways. Booker T. Washington opposed Poe's scheme and worked with other black leaders to make sure the bill failed. Adaptation to the political framework imposed upon blacks by whites became key to ensuring that blacks received a modicum of benefit from democratic government. Collector of customs for the port in Wilmington was one of the highest-paying patronage positions in the state.

² Hayumi Higuchi, “White Supremacy on the Cape Fear,” 140; Kenzer, *Enterprising Southerners*, 125. Kenzer observed that blacks of all socio-economic backgrounds were able to attain college educations and, as a result, pursued careers in business and private enterprise rather than trades. He concluded that achieving higher education for all blacks, regardless of pre-emancipation status, was a unifying goal for the community rather than one that divided upper and lower classes of blacks.